

Office of the Governor

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Gov. Gary Locke Funds Phase-out of PBDE Flame Retardants, Hails Plan for Regulating Future Chemicals

OLYMPIA - Jan. 5, 2005 - Gov. Gary Locke today received a list of recommendations developed by the state departments of Ecology and Health to protect the public from toxic flame retardants.

Last January, Locke directed the Department of Ecology, in collaboration with the Department of Health, to develop a plan to reduce the threat of PBDE (polybrominated diphenyl ether) flame retardants, which are added to plastics or fabrics so they won't catch fire or burn so easily. The 2004 supplemental budget passed by the Legislature provided funding for drafting the rule and imposed some additional requirements.

Locke's proposed budget for the 2005-07 biennium provides funds to begin implementing the plan and to pursue a separate effort to identify and restrict the use of other problem chemicals.

"We must pay closer attention to the chemicals we're being exposed to in our daily lives," Locke said. "Too often we learn these chemicals are a problem only after we've been exposed to them for years. We need to change that, and this plan calls for action to reduce current exposures and prevent future ones."

PBDEs escape from products and make their way into the environment, wildlife and people. They have been detected in human blood and breast milk, at steadily rising levels, as well as in the environment and food chain.

In response to Locke's executive order, Ecology and Health are calling for a ban on the use of two PBDEs - Penta-BDE and Octa-BDE - in new products. The sole U.S. manufacturer of the two chemicals ceased production at the end of 2004, and a state ban would ensure that no one could resume or initiate production and use of the chemicals in products sold in Washington state.

If Locke's budget proposal is approved, the agencies will develop a plan to phase out the use of the third PBDE, known as Deca-BDE. The plan would allow time for more investigation of potential alternative products that are safer. This approach provides an opportunity for Ecology and Health to craft a ban that doesn't jeopardize fire safety, unnecessarily burden Washington businesses, or prompt the use of alternative flame retardants that might be even more harmful.

"We don't know everything about Deca, but we can expect it to break down into problem chemicals over time," said Ecology Director Linda Hoffman. "That's why we need to reverse its buildup in our environment."

Although Deca is not considered toxic in its original state, recent studies indicate that it can break down into more harmful forms, depending on surrounding conditions. Its manufacturers maintain that the chemical poses no threat.

Ecology and Health liken the potential threat of PBDEs to the known health effects of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The health effects of PCBs did not become apparent until the chemicals had been used for years and had built up to high, lasting levels in the environment - posing real threats to people and wildlife and costing millions to clean up. State officials don't want the same thing to happen with PBDEs.

"We have some real health concerns," said Health Secretary Mary Selecky.

"Current PBDE levels do not pose an immediate health threat. It makes sense to take action now instead of allowing levels to rise and waiting to see real effects in people, especially children."

There has been no research on the health effects of PBDEs on humans. In recent animal studies, exposure to PBDEs at higher levels has been shown to cause neurological damage in lab animals. If comparable levels were reached in people, those most likely to be at risk would be fetuses and infants in the crucial stages of early development.

The action on PBDEs is part of a broader initiative, also directed by Locke, under which Ecology will track other potentially harmful chemicals that are known to build up in the food chain. Ecology has drafted a proposed regulation (PBT rule, for persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic) that identifies 26 long-lasting toxic chemicals or chemical groups that might pose a threat to environment or health and could warrant further action.

The interim PBDE plan and recommendations, along with more information about PBDEs, are available online at [www.flameretardants.org](http://www.flameretardants.org) <<http://www.toxicflameretardants.org>>. The PBT rule and related information are available online at <<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/pbt/rule/index.html>>.

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